



Susan Gainen: Co-Director, University of Minnesota Law School Career and Professional Development Center, Minneapolis, MN

[By Charisse Dengler]

To say that Susan Gainen really enjoys her job as Co-Director of Minnesota Law School's Career and Professional Development Center would be an understatement. Having held her current position for 15 years, Gainen is continually fascinated and inspired by the different paths that law students and alumni take to arrive at their careers. landed jobs, and the average starting salary for their jobs was about \$75,000 annually. Such a high success rate can be attributed to the school's nationally acclaimed faculty.

Although she said there really is no "normal" day in her line of work, she did give a basic overview of the things she handles on a weekly basis.

"I might, over the course of a few days, answer several hundred emails and be on the phone with students, employers, and alumni," she said. "I have terrific colleagues—Steve Marchese, who co-directs the office with me, Vic Massaglia, our career advisor, and John Malecha, who runs the office—and we are always trying to find new and better ways to help students and alumni. I work closely with other administrators in the building: the dean of students and the external relations office and the registrar. I read resumes all the time and spend a lot of time talking to students and listening to them as they tell me about their plans and goals."

She also handles a wide variety of administrative tasks: managing the logistics for out-of-town interview programs; exploring and developing novel uses for Symplicity; and supervising significant programs, including Career Options Night and Spring Break Shadows. In addition, Gainen and her co-workers plan the 70 to 80 programs that the office presents and/or co-presents during the year. She also works on the office's website and blog.

"I love the blog," she said. "It replaced our weekly newsletter, and we use it to support our three program tracks. One is Nuts and Bolts, which includes interviewing

and resume workshops, long-distance networking, and other basics. A second program track is Career Explorations, which we use to introduce students to practitioners in traditional and nontraditional jobs. And the third is Paths to Professionalism. Our office has embraced the part of a student's transition from school to work that is separate from the rules of professional responsibility and introduces students to professional practice and professional norms. Our blog mirrors those categories and is a great way to communicate with students and alumni."

Gainen, who graduated from Baltimore Law School in 1984, practiced law for one year and worked as a headhunter for almost seven years before coming into her current position. She has also worked in the food and automobile industries, and she thinks her past experience helped prepare her for her current position.

"Looking backwards, virtually all of my jobs have been in sales; and whether I was selling cars or finance and insurance or Spice Island spices or lawyers when I was a head hunter or law students now, I had to figure out what I was selling and what the benefit would be to the ultimate customer," she said. "How do you explain why a grocer should buy a railroad carload of Rosarita refried beans? How do you explain to someone why he should buy credit life and disability insurance on his car loan? How do you explain to an employer why it is a smart thing to recruit at the University of Minnesota Law School?"

It calls on the same skills. It calls on being interested—really, really interested—in the subject."

When it comes to describing why she likes her job, Gainen said it's because she loves people and enjoys hearing their stories.

"I loved when I started as a head hunter because that was all about individual lawyers and their stories, and it's the same thing that I have really cherished about this job for 15 years," she said. "15 years times 250 or 270 students means a lot of students, but each and every one of them was and is an individual with an individual personal story. The stories fascinate me, and the stories of their careers and career paths fascinate me. If everyone wanted to do the same job, I would have left this job a long time ago. One of the terrific secrets of this job is that even if you see 10 people in a row who say, 'I want to do litigation,' when you listen to them, they don't all want the same job."

Gainen enthusiastically encourages law students to utilize their career services offices. She said when it comes to looking for a job, "there are many wheels that you need not reinvent," and working with career services professionals can save you both time and energy.

She also encourages students who want to pursue careers outside of practicing law, as well as students who have no idea what they want to do, to contact their career services offices.



"We can help people who don't think that we can help them," she said. "And often, as students get ready to graduate and they decide to meet with us, they will say, 'Gosh, I wish I had talked to you a year ago or two years ago.'"

Gainen also stresses that career services offices are open to alumni, and she encourages alumni to contact their schools if they are changing careers or even just changing the focus of their careers.

"I say that the door to [the] Career and Professional Development [Center] is open until you die or retire and move to Phoenix or commit a felony," she said.

In her spare time, Gainen likes to cook with the 800 cookbooks that she owns; so far, she's won blue (and other) ribbons at the Minnesota State Fair for jam, jelly, and barbeque sauce. She's also an "obsessed watercolorist" and a big fan of Jasper Fforde.

ON THE NET

Jasper Fforde
www.jasperfforde.com

Minnesota State Fair
www.mnstatefair.org

University of Minnesota Career and Professional Development Center Weblog
blog.lib.umn.edu/lawcso/vocare